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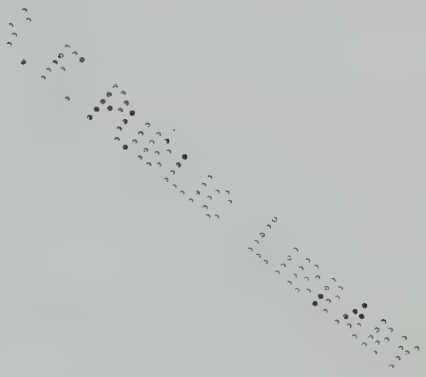

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SIR THOMAS LAWRENCE, P.R.A.

1769–1830

BY R. S. CLOUSTON

IF the biographical sketches of Lawrence had been fiction instead of fact, they would most undoubtedly have received severe treatment from the critics. He had everything against him; and yet his life is a line of unbroken successes. He had the merest smattering of education, having been sent to school at six and removed, through his father's failure in business, at eight. Yet in after life he fascinated no less a man than Lord Byron, who wrote of him that he "talked delightfully."

His art training was, most unfortunately, of even shorter duration, and came at a time when he had already formed his style for good or evil. He had what in his instance was certainly the misfortune to be an infant prodigy, and, though admitted to the Royal Academy schools at the age of eighteen, he was already so proficient in his art that he could learn nothing from his fellow students, and but little from his masters. This is the more to be regretted because, through his father's greed (or bad judgment) an offer made by a Derbyshire baronet to send the youthful genius to Rome had been refused several years previously. "His son's talents," he said, "required no cultivation."

Rome was then, and for some time after, by far the best school for a young artist, and it is impossible to do more than merely guess what English art lost by this ungracious refusal. There can be little doubt that, had it been accepted, Lawrence would have been a greater painter, but exactly how much greater no one can say. Abnormal precocity is not necessarily genius, or Angelica Kauffmann would have been one of the great artists of the world; but "the fair Angelica" had early advantages which Lawrence had not. His faults are those of his training

—or rather his want of it. His rather mediocre eye for colour and his lack of what painters call "quality" were among the chief; and to these, at the time of his admission into the Academy schools, he had, by sheer force of circumstances, been able to pay no attention. Eighteen is by no means too old for the ordinary art student to begin the serious study of oils, but not one in a thousand has spent the previous ten years in full practice as a professional artist. The probability is that, had Lawrence been given the opportunity of learning what colour and quality are at their highest, he would have been an immensely greater artist, for his early work in London was most happily affected by Sir Joshua's best period, and a similar influence can be seen in his much later Italian portraits.

Personal history is a large factor in every artistic career, but, in the case of Lawrence, a knowledge of his early life and the circumstances surrounding him are more than usually essential before a critical estimate can be formed of his ability.

Little is known of his mother, except that she was of good family, and was disowned by her relations on her clandestine marriage with her ne'er-do-well husband, but her influence on the up-bringing and education of the future President probably accounts for the fact that he could always take his place in any society, from royalty downwards.

Thomas Lawrence, senior, though at the time of his son's birth an innkeeper in Bristol, was an educated man and the son of a clergyman; but, in the words of Cunningham, he "was either so unsteady of purpose or so unfortunate in choice that he became successively attorney, poetaster, spouter of odes, actor, revenue officer, farmer, and publican, and prospered in none of these callings." The only thing in which he succeeded was running his son's talents on a commercial basis; and even in that his wrong-headedness was only saved from failure by the indubitable genius of the lad. One of his mistakes has already been mentioned; another is a cause for laughter rather than regret. When his son was beginning to be known in London he organised an exhibition of his works, to which he added, at considerable expense—out of a legacy to his daughter—a collection of *stuffed birds*, which had afterwards to be sold for a mere trifle.

Young Lawrence was barely five years old when his father discovered that in him he held a trump card. "Gentlemen," he would say to his customers, "here's my son. Will you have him recite from the poets or take your portraits?"

A story given by most of his biographers may bear repetition. Mr. (afterwards Lord) Kenyon and his wife arrived at the father's inn, tired by a long journey, and—probably justly—were incensed at the want of attention they received. The elder Lawrence suggested that his son should recite any speech from Milton's *Pandæmonium* or take their likenesses. While this was being curtly refused, an angelically beautiful, curly-haired boy broke into the room riding on a stick; and the

situation was saved. Like every one else who met him, either then or in after life, Mrs. Kenyon was irresistibly attracted. "Could he draw that gentleman's portrait?" "That I can, and very like too"; and he produced what we are told was an "astonishingly striking likeness" in half an hour. After this success he was coaxed into attempting a portrait of the lady, "if," as he said, "she will turn her side to me, for her face is not straight." This was true, which shows Lawrence's inborn faculty of choosing the best view of his sitters, though in a child the remark only caused amusement. The drawing was nearly half life-size, "delicately shaded," and furthermore, the likeness was recognised twenty-five years afterwards. This is an instance of early precocity which it would be difficult to match, and almost impossible to beat.

At this time his father, having failed in Bristol, was, through the assistance of his friends, installed in the principal inn—the Black Bear—at Devizes, which was one of the chief halting-places on the road to Bath. Many of the notabilities of the day rested at the inn and, we need not doubt, were shown old Lawrence's chief stock-in-trade. When, therefore, the appointed end to amateur inn-keeping arrived, and the boy's talent became the one mainstay of the family, a move to Oxford, where he was already known by many College dignitaries, was not so rash as it appears. His pencil, says Cunningham, "was not confined to grave sexagenarians, for many of the younger nobility and gentry were anxious to have their portraits taken by the phenomenon; and the female beauty of this dignified city, and its wealthy neighbourhood, equally pressed upon his talents."

On leaving Oxford, after a short stay at Weymouth, Lawrence's family took a house at Bath, where an elder brother, a clergyman, had the lectureship of St. Michael's. The rent was £100, a large figure in those days, and though lodgers were taken to begin with, it sufficiently shows the young artist's commercial value. He was soon fully employed with commissions, and his prices for a crayon head raised from a guinea to a guinea and a half. His portrait of Mrs. Siddons, as Zara, was engraved, and his fame, even at that early age, was more than merely local. "His studio," to quote Cunningham once more, "was the favourite resort of the beauty, fashion, and taste of Bath; young ladies loved to sit and converse with this handsome prodigy; men of taste and vertu purchased his crayon-heads, which he drew in vast numbers, and carried them far and near, even into foreign lands, to show as the work of the boy-artist of Britain." Amateurs, however, were not alone in acknowledging his talent. Hoare, the R.A. who was then famous for crayon-heads, was attracted by the young genius, and gave him, by Lawrence's own admission, "much advice and assistance." A more convincing proof is that for a copy, *from a copy*, made either just before or shortly after his fourteenth birthday, the Society of Arts awarded him their medal and a prize of five guineas. Their rules prevented them from also giving the gold palette; but, by a special vote of the committee, he received the

"great silver palette, *gilt*." It was the first, though far from the last time, that iron-bound rules were broken to do honour to the youthful artist.

Lawrence's self-sacrifice in the interests of his family is a most admirable trait in his character. He regretted that he was not allowed to go on the stage because he thought he should then have been able to assist them sooner; and there can be little doubt such a precocious boy was perfectly aware of the fact that by "pot-boiling" for all these years at Bath he was damaging his career as an artist. At length, in 1787, when he was eighteen, he thought himself strong enough to go to London for study, and at the same time continue to support his family. At the Academy schools, which he entered in September of that year, he was so far ahead of the other students that he did not even enter for the ordinary competitions. His biographers say that he studied hard. This is undoubtedly true, for Lawrence was a hard and conscientious worker; but, with the cares of a spendthrift family on his young shoulders, the *time* given to study must have been of the shortest. The year 1787 was the first in which he exhibited at the Academy, sending seven pictures. In 1788 he showed six portraits; in 1789, thirteen; and in 1790 twelve pictures. The probability, therefore, is that the great improvement in Lawrence's style at this time arose more from his friendly relations with Reynolds and other artists than from what he learnt in the Academy schools.

In 1790 he painted his portrait of Miss Farren (afterwards Lady Derby) which brought him still more to the front. One of the rules of the Academy is that no man shall be elected as an associate until he is twenty-four; but in this year, when only twenty-one, he was put up for election, and received three votes as against the sixteen cast for Wheatley. If this was a failure, it is the sole instance of anything of the kind in Lawrence's history. In the following year, at the express desire of the King and Queen, his election took place, and in 1792, on the death of Reynolds, still more honours came to him. Lawrence had then only been an associate for three months, but the King at once appointed him as painter-in-ordinary. Yet another rule was broken by the Dilettanti Society, who, though Lawrence had never been "across the Alps," elected him as a member, and their painter, in Sir Joshua's place. There seems, indeed, to have been a general consensus of opinion that rules were not intended to apply to such men as Thomas Lawrence. "Never, perhaps, in this country," says Redgrave, "had a man so young, so uneducated, and so untried in his art, advanced, as it were, *per saltum* to the honours and emoluments of the profession."

Lawrence was made a full R.A. in 1794 *; was knighted by the Regent in 1815, in spite of the fact that he had been of the Princess's party; and on the death of West in 1820 was the one possible choice as President. A wonderful record, this, for a man who, both in art and general education, was, to all intents and purposes, self-taught.

* He was elected R.A. on Feb. 10. 1794, but received his diploma December 4, 1795, which accounts for the different dates given by his biographers.

In 1814, Paris being open to travellers, Lawrence hastened to study the collection in the Louvre, but was recalled almost at once by the Regent, who wished to form a commemorative gallery of the crowned heads and important personages connected with the restoration of the Bourbons. The idea was more fully carried out when Lawrence was despatched to Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818. From thence he went to Vienna and Rome to complete his commission, painting most of the royalty and many of the notable personages of Europe—in all, twenty-four portraits.

A portrait painter is at a considerable disadvantage when his work is compared with that of his contemporaries in landscape or figure. He is not only influenced, in the vast majority of instances, by the art theories and leanings of his time, but is tied down to its fashions in dress. The necessity was much lamented by Sir Joshua Reynolds, who allowed himself very considerable latitude in rendering the costumes and coiffures of his lady sitters. This method has certain recommendations at the time; for fashions change so rapidly that they may be already a thing of the past before the portrait is seen by any one but the sitter. Gainsborough, on the other hand (as, indeed, most other artists of the period), simply exercised a choice, and once his costume was decided on, treated it almost literally. Now that more than a century has elapsed, and none but the most learned of experts can tell whether or not a dress was in the height of the reigning fashion, the necessity for Sir Joshua's attitude regarding eighteenth-century costume is not so apparent; it is even, to say the least, doubtful if there was any artistic gain.

Lawrence produced most of his work at a time when there is little to be said in extenuation of the fashions. The misplacement of the waist, and the oiled and curled ringlets, though he treated them as well as we can expect such things to be treated, are anything but artistically beautiful in themselves.

Redgrave, who, of all Lawrence's biographers, is the most severe in his criticisms, frankly admits the disadvantage of the high-waisted dress. That had gone out of fashion when he wrote; but he was not so separated in time from the reign of the "incomparable oil" as to see anything wrong in its use. On the contrary, he actually pointed out the changed method of hairdressing as an advantage Lawrence possessed over his predecessors in portraiture. He was, however, eminently fair as a critic, and he admitted, almost in the next sentence, that "we look back on the beauties of the last century almost as we do to the quaintness of mediæval times, and are apt to think nature, with her unrestrained ringlets, her mottled flesh and simple drapery, somewhat commonplace beside the pompous barbarisms which added many cubits to the stature of the beauties of the previous age."

The quotation shows the danger to which the most fair-minded critic lays himself open when influenced, as he must be, by the manners and customs of his time, artistic or otherwise. From Redgrave's point of view it was only right and proper that a woman should oil her hair, or

screw it up overnight in curl papers ; and the effect was " unrestrained." To us it is anything but that. Without going into the relative merits of oil and powder, it is now not even open to argument which most lends itself to artistic treatment, and we are bound to admit that Lawrence, with all his good fortune in other matters, did the greater part of his work at a period which, for a fashionable portrait painter, could scarcely have been less auspicious as regards the verdict of posterity.

It is doubtful if the time has yet arrived when a critical and unbiassed judgment of Lawrence's art is possible. To us, apart from art, his style is neither new nor old ; it is simply *hackneyed* through the vast number of inferior painters who copied his easier qualities. We have just come through the throes of an artistic revolution, and left all that savours of " the pretty pretty " behind us. Yet we should remember that when Lawrence made the style which in other hands degenerated into the merest bathos, it was absolutely new—as new as " Waverley " or the " Sketches by Boz " to the men who first opened their pages. Sir David Wilkie said that Lawrence had " a perfection of execution never to be equalled," while Fuseli declared his portraits to be " as well if not better drawn, and the women in a finer taste, than the best of Vandyck's." Fuseli, at least, was not a blind admirer, for it was he who said of Lawrence's Satan that " it was a d——d thing, certainly, but not the devil." The place in art assigned to him by capable critics has varied in the most surprising manner. A few years after his death he was scarcely considered, and Redgrave, writing in 1865, said : " It has taken a quarter of a century to reinstate him—not to the place which he held in his lifetime, but to the true place he should occupy." Rightly or wrongly, that " true place " has altered much since then, having been put slowly but steadily higher.

ILLUSTRATIONS

CHILDHOOD'S INNOCENCE
(JULIA, COUNTESS OF JERSEY)

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CHARLES WERTHEIMER, ESQ.

PRINCESS AMELIA,
DAUGHTER OF GEORGE III.

Photo, Hanfstaengl
WINDSOR

Photo, Braun, Clément

PRINCESS CHARLOTTE OF WALES WINDSOR

Photo, Autotype Co.

MASTER LAMBTON — COLLECTION OF LORD DURHAM

Photo, Autotype Co.

NATURE

Photo, Autotype Co.

HE PROFFERED KISS

Photo, Autotype Co.

CHILD WITH FLOWERS

Photo, Autotype Co.

COUNTESS GOWER AND DAUGHTER

Photo, Autotype Co.

COUNTESS GREY AND CHILDREN

Photo, Mansell

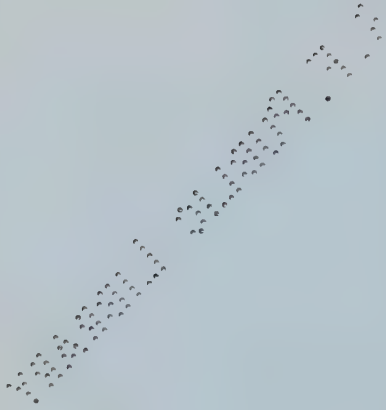
E BEAUTIFUL MISS CROKER

Photo, Mansell

COUNTESS BLESSINGTON — WALLACE COLLECTION

Photo, Mansell

ELIZA FARREN



Photo, Autotype Co.

MISS MACDONALD

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COUNTESS GROSVENOR

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LADY IRIMLESTON

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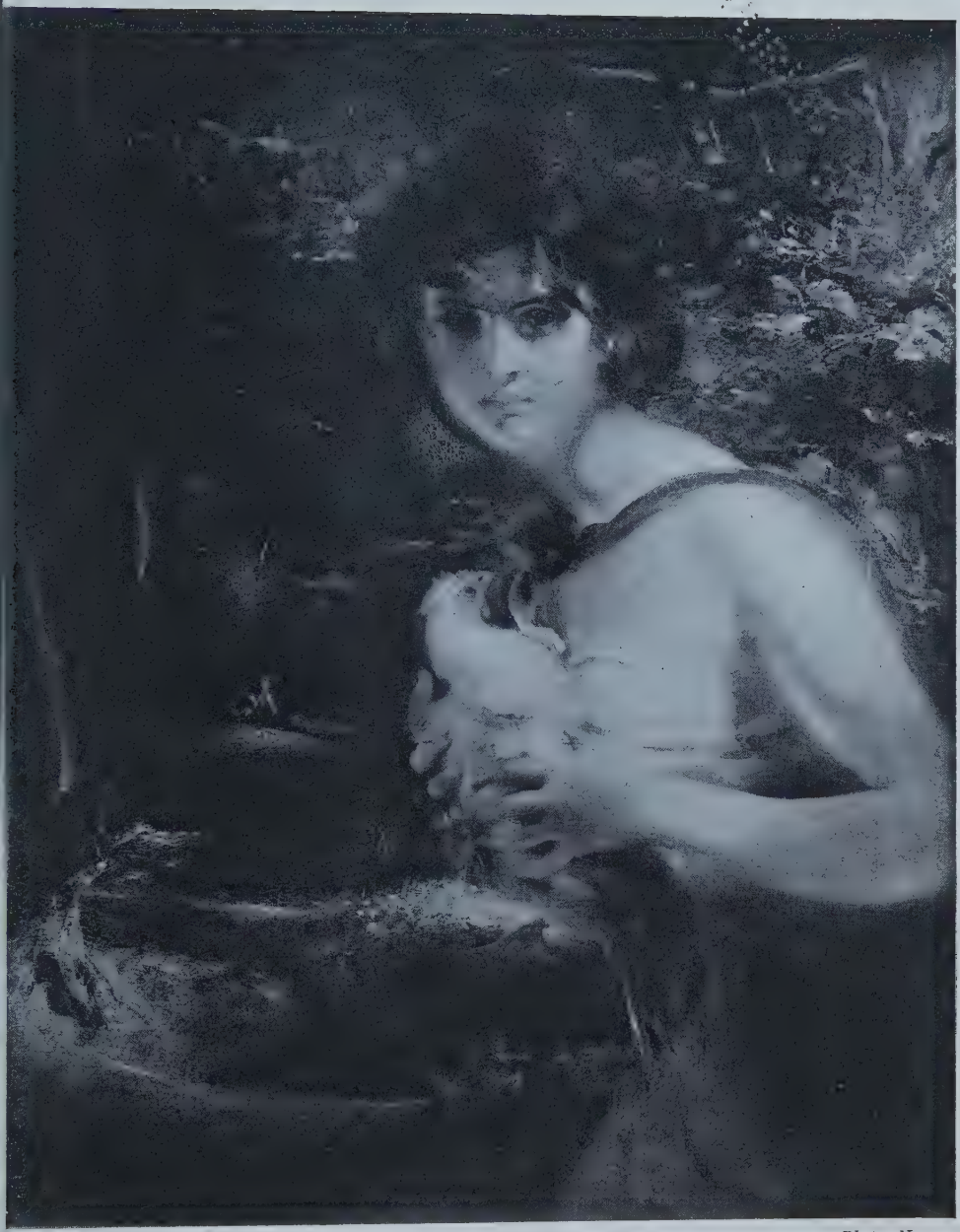
JAMES ORROCK, ESQ., R.I.

Photo, Newnes

MISS PHELEPS

REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF
JAMES ORROCK, ESQ., R.I.



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A GIPSY GIRL

ROYAL ACADEMY (DIPLOMA GALLERY)

Photo, Hanfstaengl

LADY MARY BENTINCK

CHATSWORTH

Photo, Mansell

LADY CALLCOTT — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Photo, Hanfstaengl

MRS. SIDDONS

NATIONAL GALLERY

Photo, Hanfstaengl

MISS CAROLINE FRY

NATIONAL GALLERY

Photo, Mansell

PORTRAIT OF A LADY

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LADY CHARLOTTE GREVILLE

CHATSWORTH

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CAROLINE OF BRUNSWICK

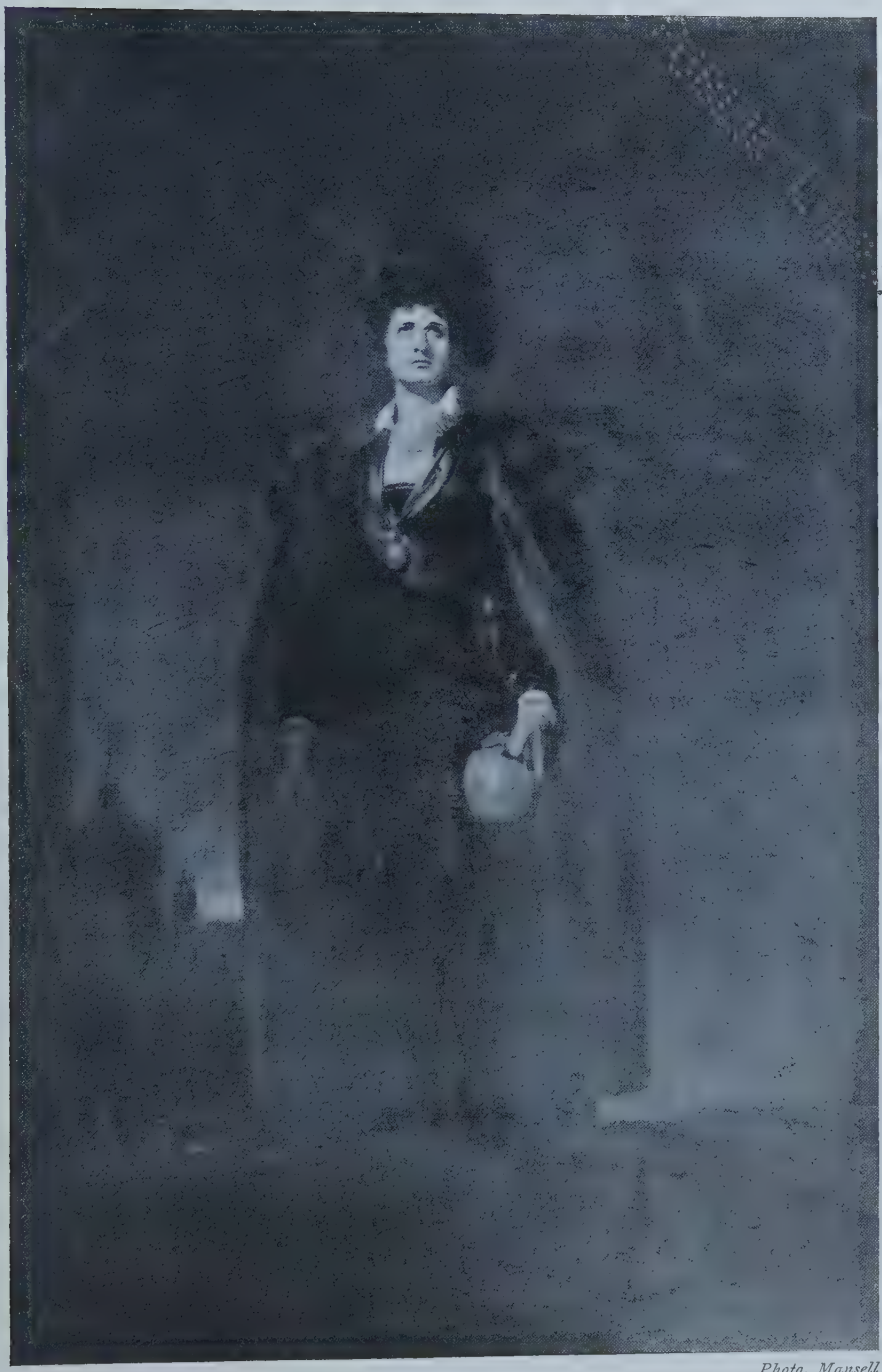
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

Photo, Mansell

CAROLINE OF BRUNSWICK — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Photo, Mansell

SARAH SIDDONS — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY



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J. P. KEMBLE AS HAMLET — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Photo, Hanfstaengl

WILLIAM LINLEY — DULWICH

Photo, Emery Walker

GEORGE IV. NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Photo, Emery Walker

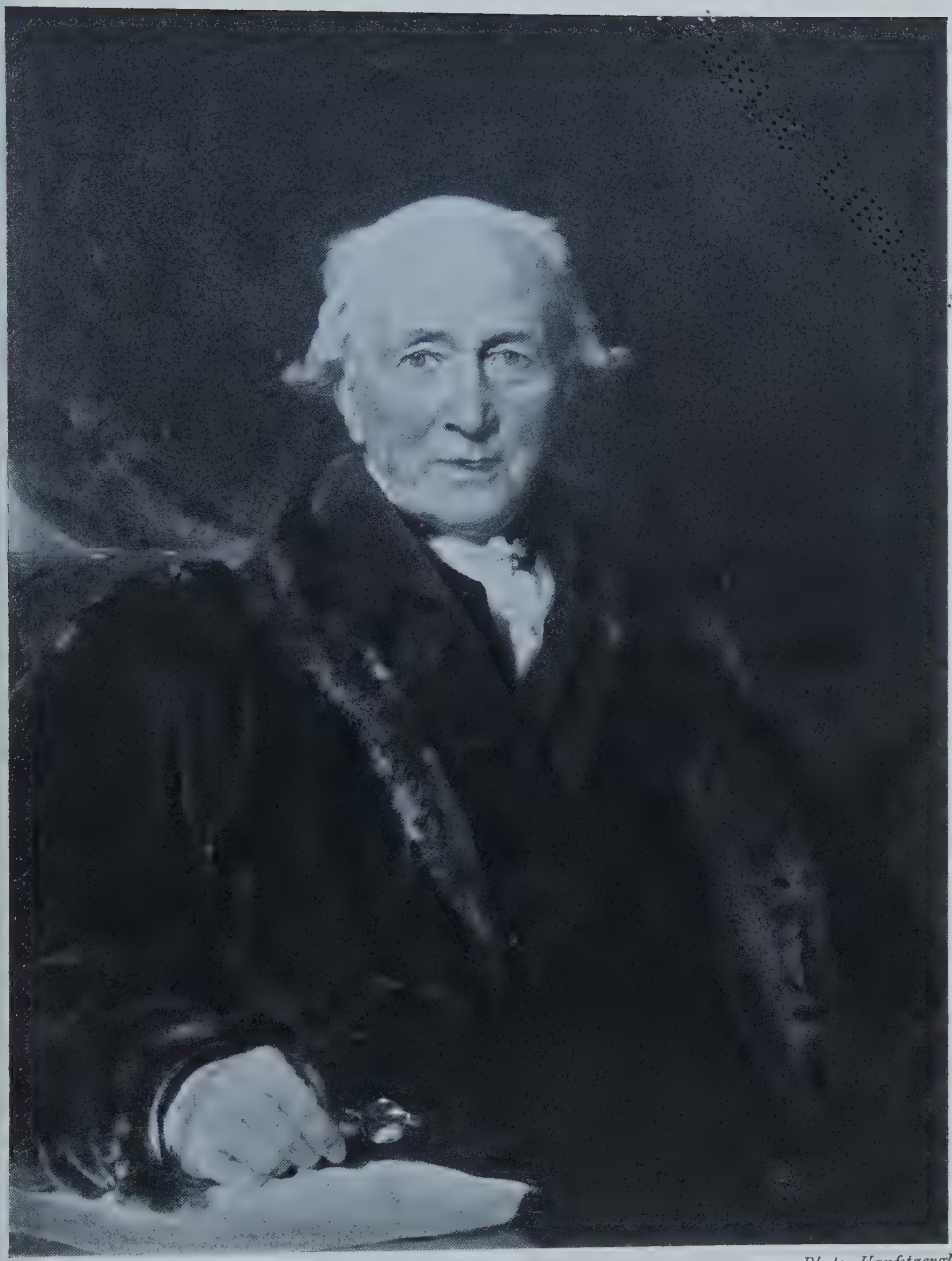
SIR WILLIAM GRANT
(MASTER OF THE ROLLS)

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Photo, Braun, Clément

LORD WHITWORTH

LOUVRE



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JOHN JULIUS ANGERSTEIN — NATIONAL GALLERY

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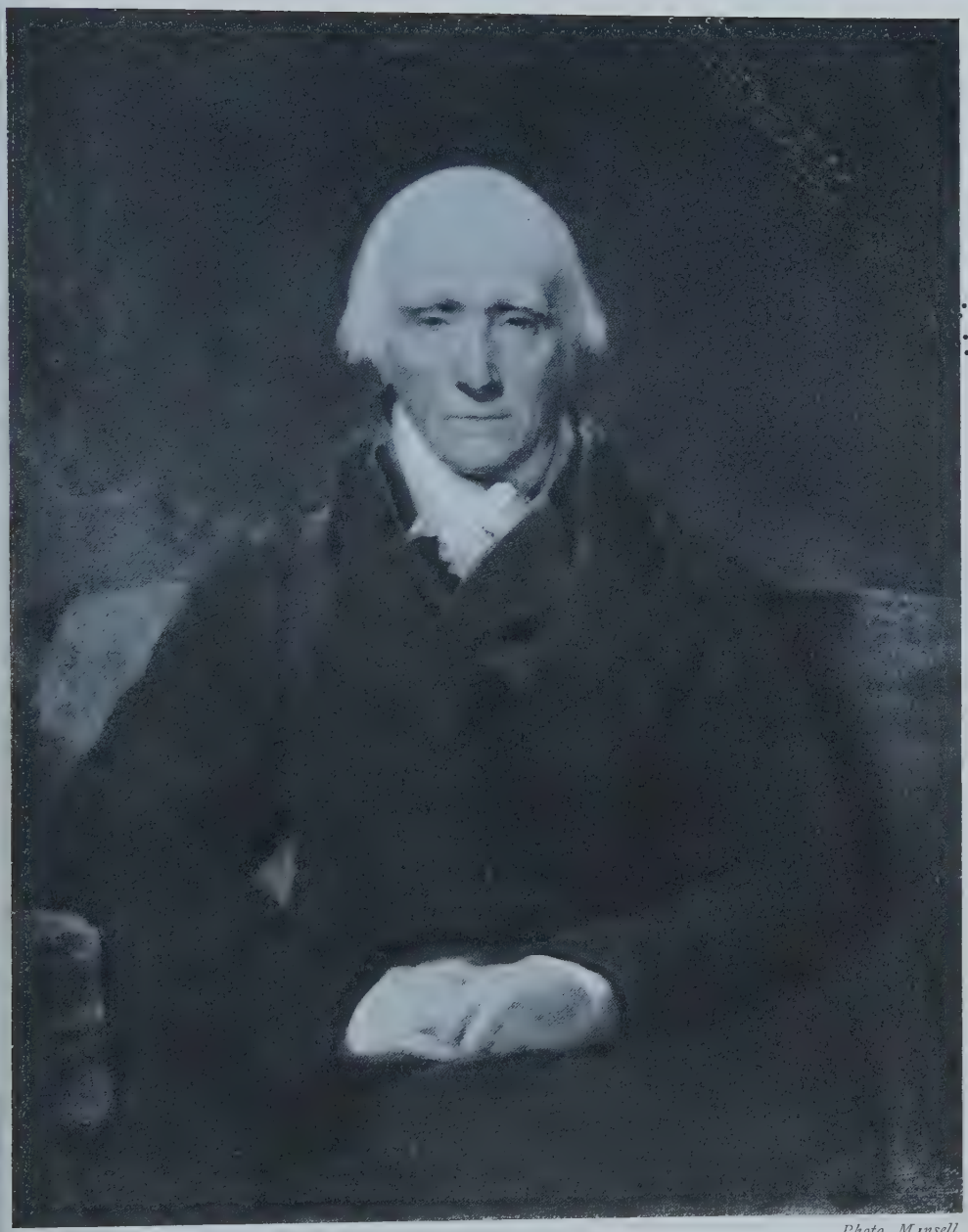
SIR JOHN SOANE, R.A. SOANE MUSEUM

Photo, Gray

SAMUEL WOODBURN — FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM



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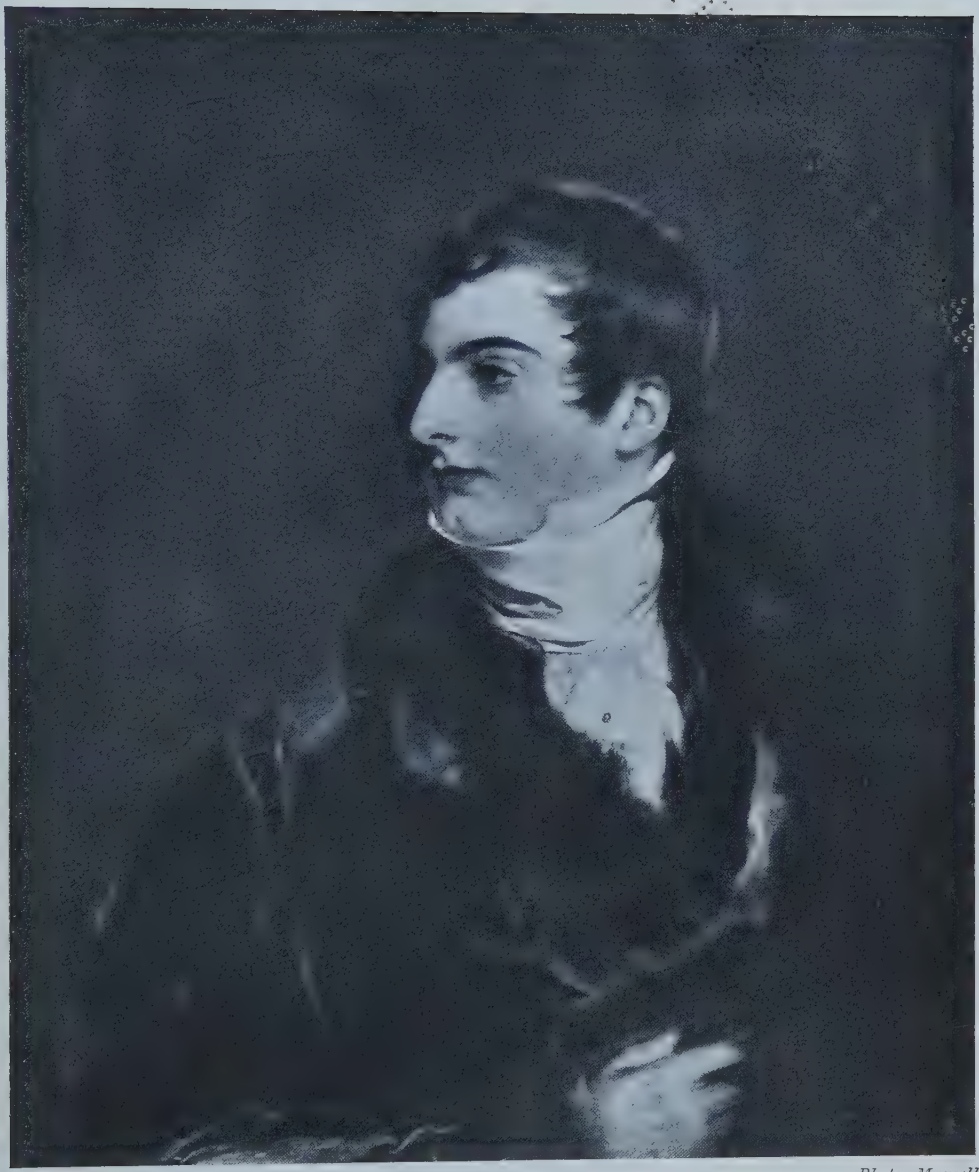
WARREN HASTINGS

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY



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JOHN ARTHUR DOUGLAS
(LORD BLOOMFIELD)

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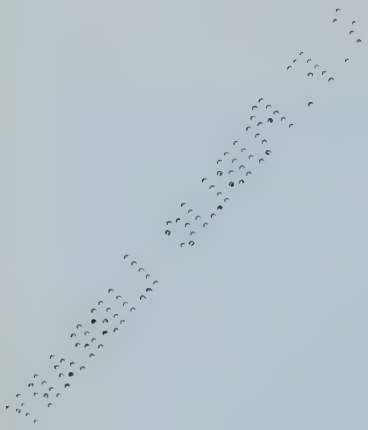

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VISCOUNT MELVILLE

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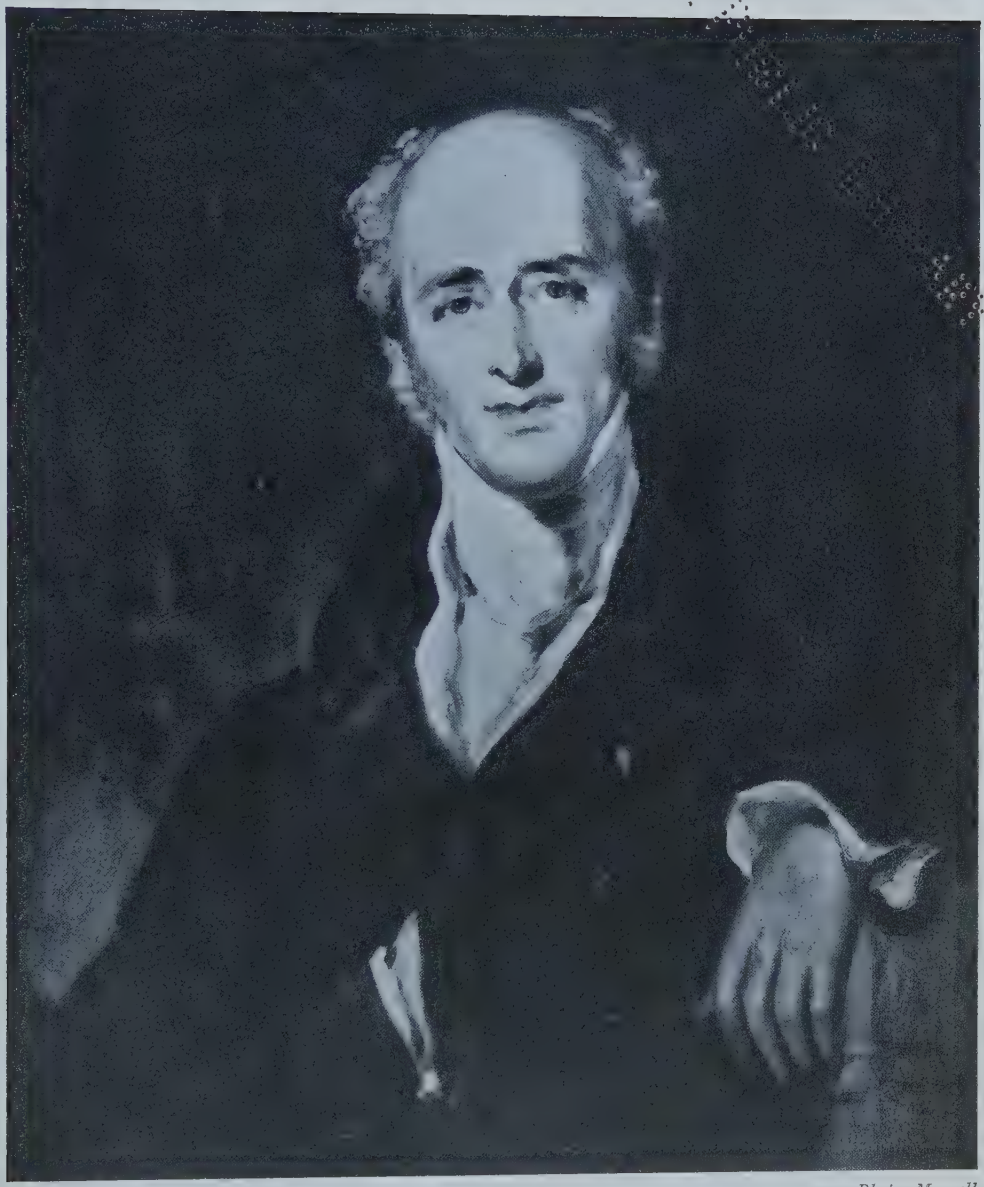
THE RT. HON. HENRY BATHURST, K.G. WINDSOR



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CHARLES, SECOND EARL GREY — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

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PRINCE OF HARDENBERG,
STATE CHANCELLOR OF PRUSSIA

WINDSOR

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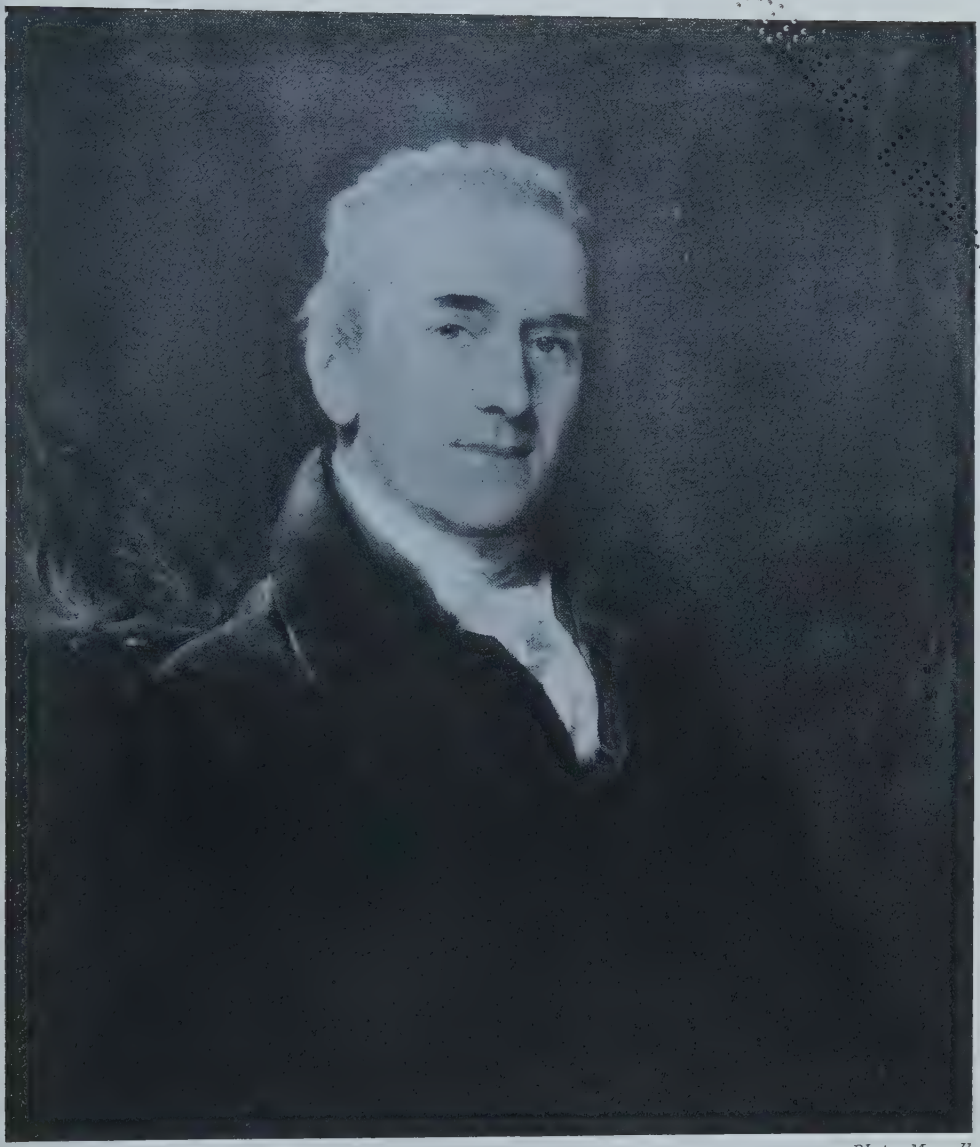
MARQUIS OF LONDONDERRY — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY



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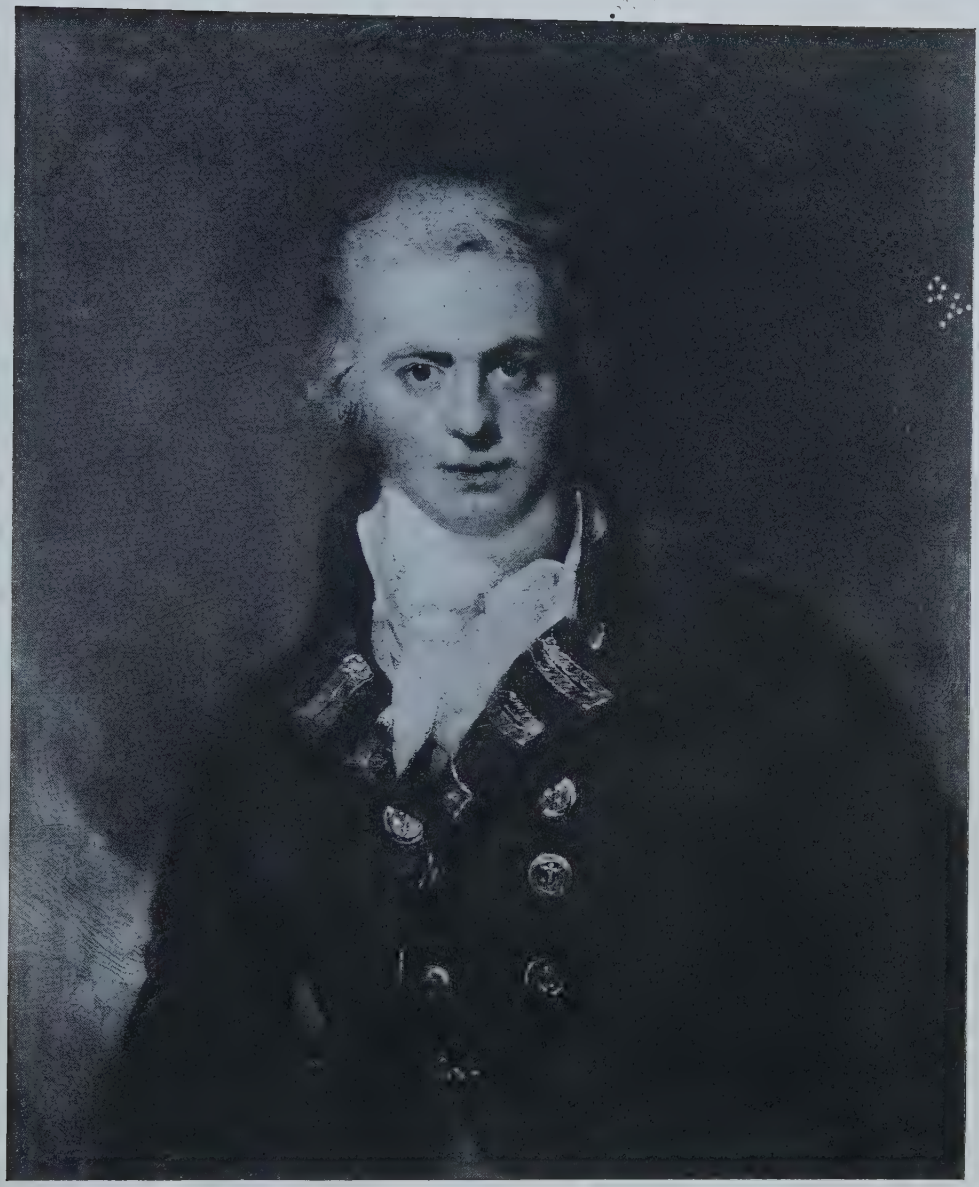
SIR JOHN MOORE, K.B. NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY



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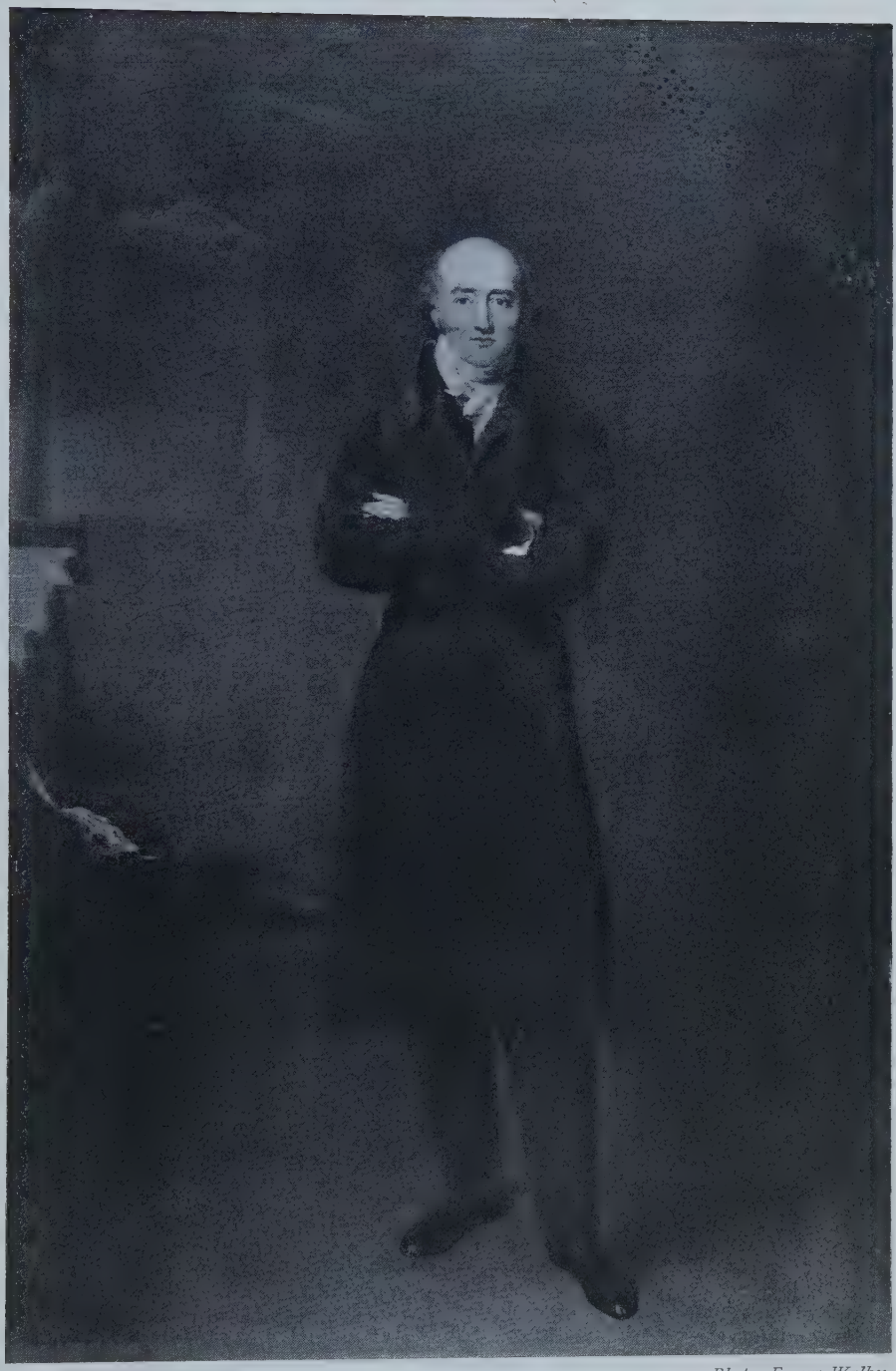
SIR GRAHAM MOORE — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY



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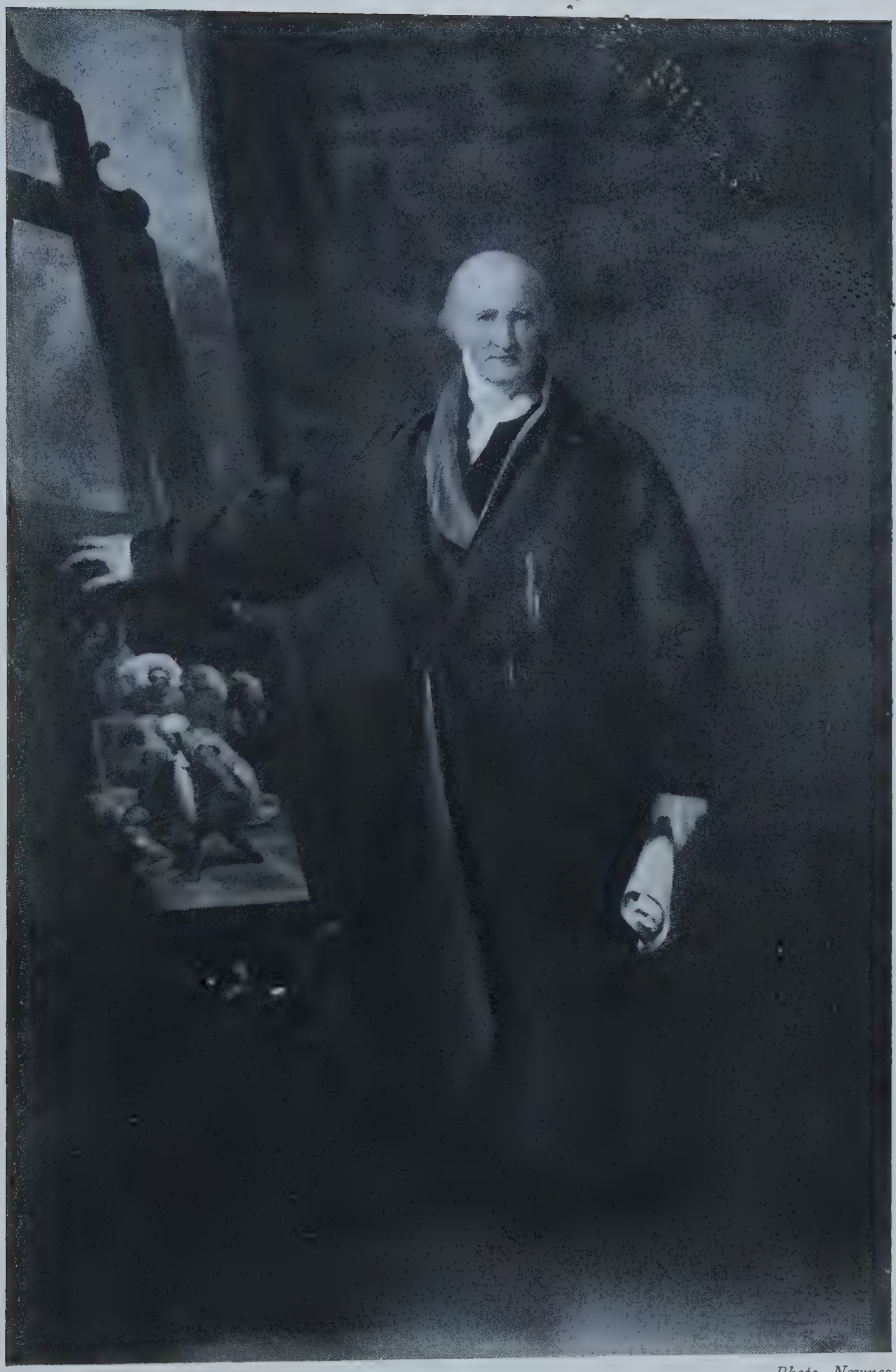
GEORGE CANNING — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY



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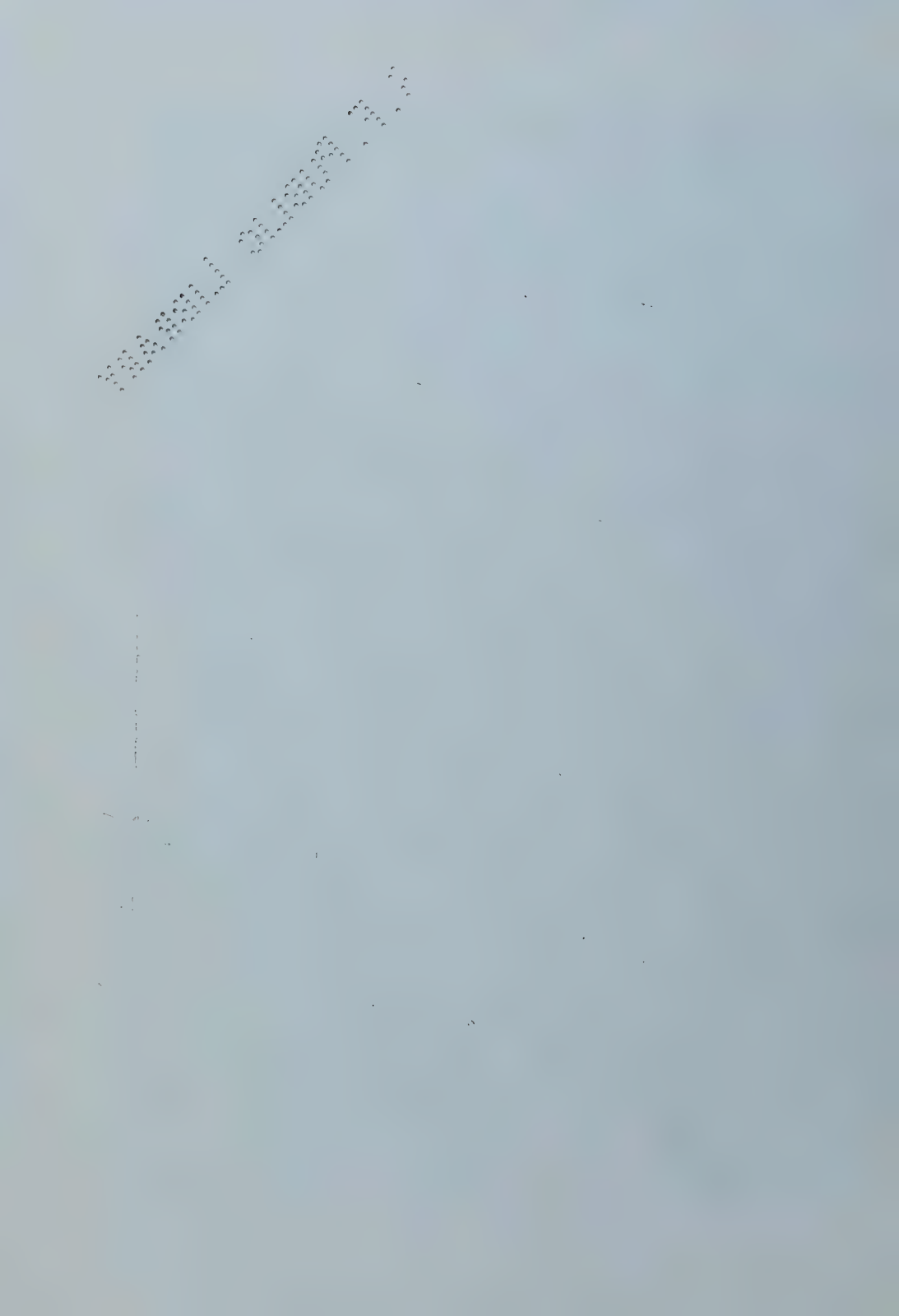
BENJAMIN WEST, P.R.A. NATIONAL GALLERY



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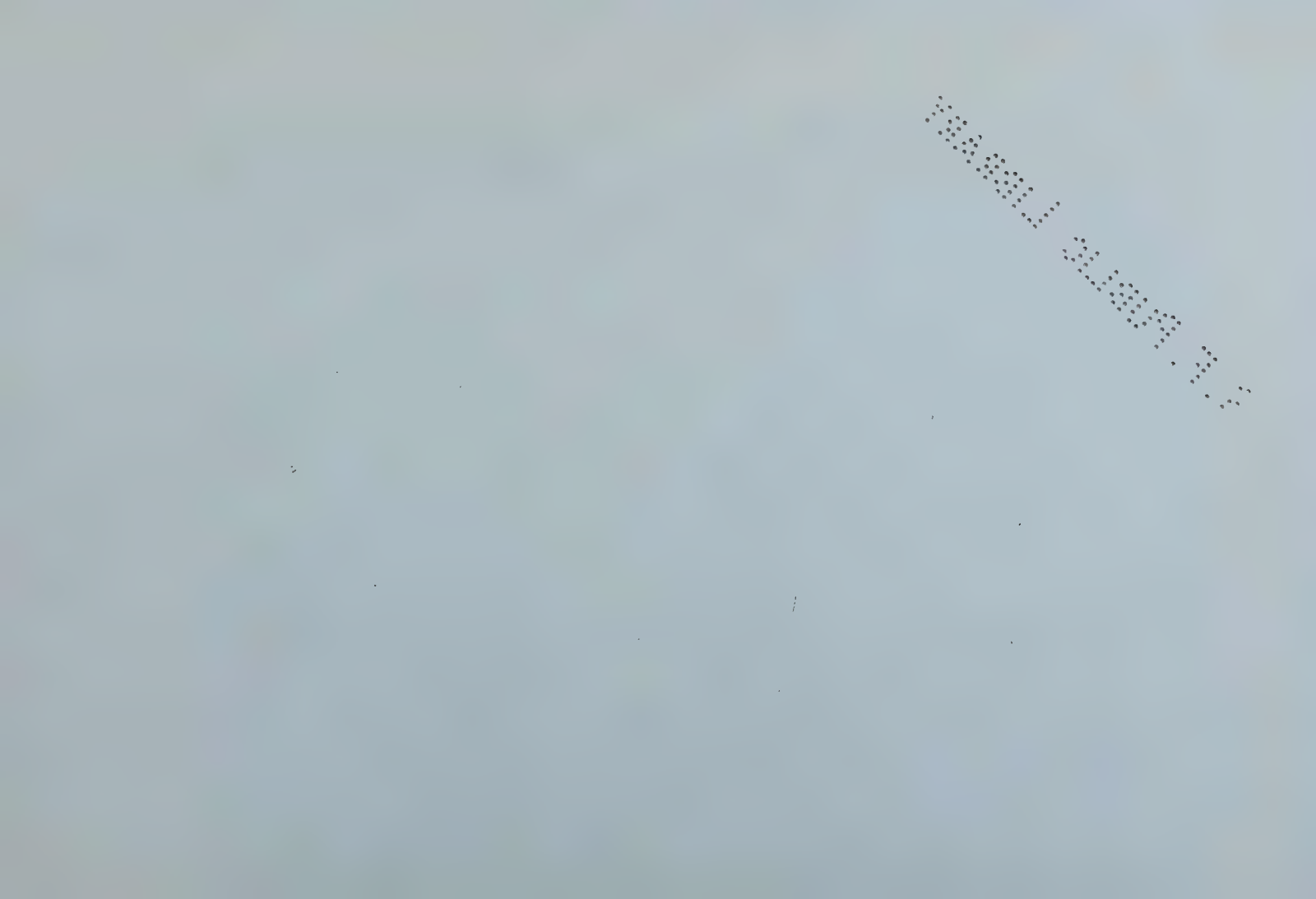
THOMAS CAMPBELL — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY



WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

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